

**James Hodapp, ed. *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2020.
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DARIA TUNCA

dtunca@uliege.be
Université de Liège

In the introduction to *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature*, editor James Hodapp outlines the aim of this collection of essays, which is to “interven[e] in the Afropolitan debate by expanding what Afropolitanism means” (7). As is widely known in literary circles, the concept of “Afropolitanism” – a portmanteau of “African” and “cosmopolitanism” – came to prominence after the near-simultaneous publication of two separate pieces on the topic in 2005. The first text, a journalistic essay by novelist Taiye Selasi entitled “Bye Bye Babar,” used the term “Afropolitan” to describe young diasporic Africans living in urban centres around the world – people who, according to Selasi, “belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many” (Selasi n.p.). The second essay, by theorist Achille Mbembe, was initially published in French as “Afropolitanisme,” and was then issued in English translation two years later. Mbembe’s short piece is markedly different from Selasi’s in both tone and focus, but it somewhat similarly emphasizes the fact that the cultural history of Africa “can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itineracy, mobility, and displacement” (Mbembe 27). Unlike Selasi, Mbembe also discusses movement on the continent itself.

Over the years, Afropolitanism has been at the centre of intense academic debates. The clarity of these discussions has been muddled by the term’s double genealogy, but what most critical comments have in common is that they point to the concept’s potential limitations, arguing that Afropolitanism puts undue emphasis on certain categories of Africans – for example, those who belong to the affluent middle class

and live in urban areas. Other scholars have been more optimistic as to the usefulness of the term, underscoring its potential to combat stereotypes about Africa and Afro-pessimistic views. In many ways, *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* continues these debates, but it also sets itself a clear agenda: that of “reclaiming [Afropolitanism] from its current trajectory of characterizing a niche elite literature for Western readers” (7). Somewhat ironically, the volume attempts to do this by approaching Afropolitan texts from the perspective of World Literature, a framework that, as Hodapp acknowledges, is “not without its elite tendencies” (6). However, it would be unfair to unduly dwell on this tension, all the more so as Mbembe’s description of Afropolitanism as “a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity” (Mbembe 28–29) signals a potential compatibility between Afropolitanism and World Literature that is worthy of careful investigation.

In addition to the introduction (included under the heading Chapter 1), the volume is made up of eleven chapters. Chapter 2, by Birgit Neumann, is one of the book’s strongest contributions. It adopts a Mbembian definition of Afropolitanism that emphasizes movement and cultural exchange within Africa, and shows how Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s novel *Dust* (2014), through its use of thematic and formal devices, provides the basis for a distinctly African cosmopolitanism that moves away from Western-centric understandings of World Literature. In Chapter 3, Anna von Rath examines German author SchwarzRund’s self-styled “Afropolitan” novel *Biskaya: Afropolitaner Berlin-Roman* (2016), which focuses on a black female musician who uses art to deal with the anxiety of non-belonging, caused by racism in Germany. Having established that SchwarzRund’s novel is outspokenly political, von Rath questions the author’s use of the descriptor “Afropolitan,” which is often considered to be (strategically) apolitical, and she concludes to the political potential of Afropolitanism.

While von Rath encourages a broad conceptual understanding of Afropolitanism, Shilpa Daithota Bhat in Chapter 4 makes a case for greater cultural and ethnic inclusiveness of the label, arguing for the increased visibility of Africans of Asian descent in Afropolitan studies. In this context, Bhat presents M.G. Vassanji’s memoir *And Home Was Kariakoo* (2013) as an exemplar of what she calls “Indian Ocean Afropolitanism,” in reference to the route followed by South Asians when migrating to East Africa. As was already the case with Neumann’s emphasis on the need to develop an Africa-based understanding of Afropolitanism in Chapter 2,

Bhat's contribution is a response to a tendency within scholarly criticism to neglect some of the avatars of Afropolitanism, rather than an expression of disapproval of Afropolitanism itself (which, in Mbembe's essay, explicitly includes Africans of Asian descent).

Chapter 5, by Julie Iromuanya, explores A. Ogoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015), a novel in which a black Lagosian man one day wakes up in a white body (except for his buttocks, which remain black, hence the book's title). The chapter informs us that most reviewers have approached the novel through the lens of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), but Iromuanga instead felicitously proposes to put Barrett's text in dialogue with African American novels of passing, without however losing sight of *Blackass*'s Nigerian setting. In this discussion, the mobility inherent in Afropolitanism is social – afforded by whiteness – rather than merely geographical, which testifies to the concept's versatility. Another illustration of how Afropolitanism can be integrated into a wider critical framework is provided in Chapter 6, in which Juan Meneses reads Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) as a text that outlines a form of "eco-Afropolitanism." Meneses shows how Afropolitanism, far from being individualistic and apolitical, can in this new environmental guise be conceptualized as the expression of communal affiliations.

Amatoritsero Ede's contribution, in Chapter 7, is the only essay in the book that takes a largely negative view of Afropolitanism, claiming that the category as it is understood today "fails to reshape our old ways of seeing the African world and engaging or interacting with it" (122). According to Ede, the original Afropolitans were the emancipated slaves of the eighteenth-century New World, such as Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley, who engaged in "worlding" – a positive reshaping of the world. By contrast, Ede regards contemporary Afropolitan authors as participants in the negative process of "unworlding," an apolitical positioning that occurs under the pressures of print capitalism and the transnational publishing industry. Interestingly, Ede's contribution is immediately followed by Chielozona Eze's, who adopts a starkly different stance in Chapter 8. Eze argues that contemporary Afropolitanism denotes a form of openness, an inclusivity that distances itself from nativism and which presents the world as unbounded. The scholar substantiates his position by examining poetry by Romeo Oriogun and Chris Abani, both of whom are said to explore the body as a site of infinite possibilities. At this stage in *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature*, the eclectic critical approaches gathered under the umbrella term "Afropolitanism" start

to accumulate, leading readers to wonder whether the concept is truly a clearly defined theoretical lens or whether it is, rather more loosely, the ideological basis for an inclusive type of twenty-first-century African literary criticism – a contemporary framework that seeks to expand the examination of African literatures beyond counter-discursive readings that have focused on how the continent defines itself in opposition to the West.

The potential of Afropolitanism as an “ethical-ontological, fundamentally open, reading stance” (153) is further explored in Chapter 9, in which Aretha Phiri revisits a major contemporary Afropolitan text, Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013). Arguing that Selasi’s novel re-imagines diaspora as an existential site, Phiri focuses on blues aesthetics in the book and shows how such an approach might be used to re-examine and ultimately resist cultural essentialisms. In Chapter 10, Rocío Cobo-Piñero highlights how Afropolitanism, with its emphasis on mobility, allows critics to reconsider the place of Africa in the world, a claim that is illustrated through an examination of Noo Saro-Wiwa’s travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2012). In Chapter 11, Julian Wacker analyses (literal and figurative) obscurity in the work of Teju Cole, arguing that Cole’s oeuvre is a textual assemblage that coalesces into forms of worlding that conceal and contest categories and identities traditionally associated with African and diasporic writers. Finally, the collection closes with Lara El Mekkawi’s examination of privileged mobility and of those that she calls “hesitant locals” (that is, immigrants who are unsure about their position in the world as Africans) in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). Towards the end of a collection of essays that celebrates the many ways in which Africans may be citizens of the world, El Mekkawi offers a brief but sobering reminder that, for those “coming from the continent, possessing only African passports, to be of the world is [...] difficult, and it involves a painful amount of paperwork” (205).

The chapters in *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* have obviously been brought together under a clear editorial rationale, outlined in the introduction to the book; this is one of the main strengths of the volume. The inevitable overlaps in the discussions may give an impression of repetitiveness, but they are helpful in delineating critical tendencies, while discrepancies between chapters and digressions within them are equally valuable in allowing readers to locate and explore sites of scholarly contestation and hesitation. Predictably in a collective volume, some

chapters present stronger lines of argument than others, and not all contributions offer the sustained critical engagement with World Literature promised on the cover of the book. However, these imperfections should not deter interested readers. More problematic for the volume's cohesion and overall quality are a series of editing flaws: the book uses at least four different stylesheets across chapters; several references are missing from the works cited sections; there are ungrammatical sentences, as well as an unusual number of misspelt names, often occurring in alternation with the correct versions (for example, Achilles/Achille Mbembe, Noor/Noo Saro-Wiwa, Henry Louis Gate/Gates Jr, Biyavanga/Binyavanga Wainaina). Fortunately, *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature* has many qualities to counterbalance these weaknesses. Readers' overall assessment of the book will depend on their disciplinary background and knowledge, but it is likely that, across audiences, the volume will encourage fruitful reflections on African literatures, global mobility, and World Literatures.

Works Cited

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